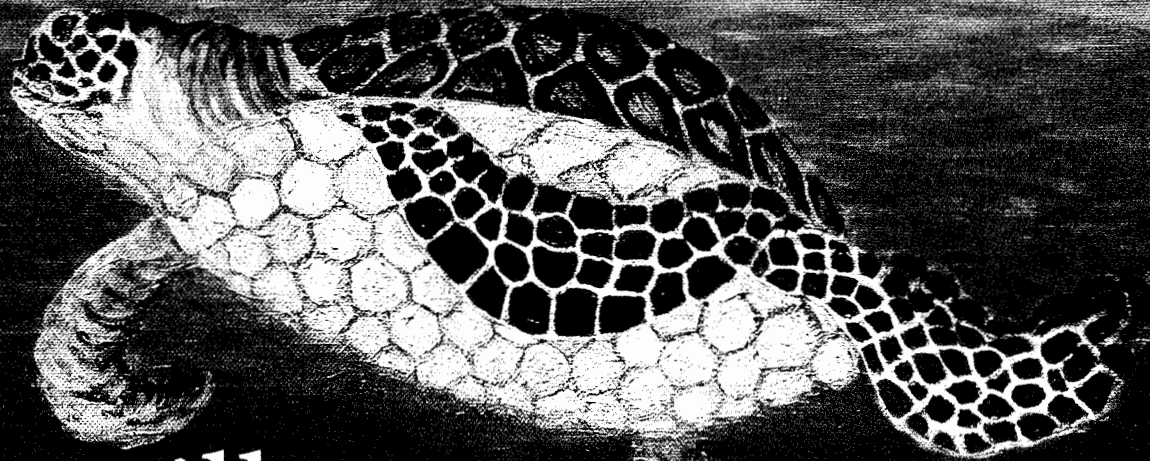


Written By Garry Angus, BSc, SOCAN.



IT TAKES a village to raise a man:

The Art Jonker Story

As the saying goes, a village is needed to raise a child.

The dedicated professionals and volunteers provided the village of support that ushered Art Jonker, 37, of Vancouver, B.C. into his new post-injury life. Jonker today is an aspiring artist who just happens to be a C5 quadriplegic. The Art Jonker of yesterday was a ripping B.C. sports kid, motocross enthusiast and software publisher; a 9 a.m. to 2 a.m. multi-tasker, who filled the business gaps seamlessly and kept his small company afloat.

“I don’t think much about my injury these days, in fact, I don’t dwell on my disability much anymore. It’s been seven years. Now I take each day as a new day to do something I want to do, which is art, and make a small business for myself at it.”

Art Jonker will speak about his past life when asked – and about the injury as a warning to others – but would prefer to talk about the present: his latest oil and acrylic paintings; his fledgling new business; and the pleasures of each new day.

The life and vocation he had built for 30 years ended with the catastrophic injury that destroyed his C5 vertebra, rendering him immobile and struggling for breath.

Jonker grew up outside of Nelson, and ski-raced, rode and raced 10-speeds in his teens, and got a few opportunities to ride off-road motorcycles.

“Riding dirt bikes was just something I used to do with my brother in my 20’s, just one of the outdoor activities while growing up,” Jonker recalls. “I rode on the motocross track because it was challenging, a pretty physical experience, a good work-out; and I have always been an exercise person.”

Jonker, who stood close to 6’2” and weighed 185 lbs, went out on a September afternoon in 1997 to try out a 250cc motocross bike at the Nanaimo track. Rather than ride it on flat ground first to adjust to its power and particular handling requirements, that day he took it straight to the track and rocketed off a jump, catching big air, losing control, and impacting head-first.

“The bike felt funny, I got in one lap and then it happened,” says Jonker. “I can only remember lying on my chest after the jump, with my mouth close to the ground, breathing in dust. I wasn’t able to breathe very well. All I wanted to do was breathe better. I had a cell phone on me, and luckily someone with me had the good sense to tell everyone to not move me until the ambulance came.”

Jonker spent two months in intensive care and two weeks in the spinal cord injury unit at Vancouver General Hospital, learning how to breathe (being completely dependent on a ventilator), learning how to survive. His neck was bridged with titanium mesh. A bone graft from his hip completed the fusing of the C4 to C6 vertebrae.

Then came the acute depression phase.



Tetra Society *of North America*

An old-fashioned approach to getting things done.

The Tetra Society brings volunteer engineers, technologists and other technically-skilled people together with people with disabilities to create customized assistive devices that cannot be found in the marketplace. Things as simple as a butter knife for a high-level quadriplegic, as complex as a scissor-lift transfer device to get a person safely into a van. Tetra, a non-profit organization with chapters cross Canada, is a response to difficulties that people with disabilities face in their search for greater independence in their lives.

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Jonker was transferred to the G.F. Strong Rehab Centre in Vancouver and spent the next two years adapting to his condition, watching TV and his former business dissolve, and going through the “why-did-this-happen-to-me blues”.

“I basically couldn’t do anything I used to be able to do,” said Jonker. “The Art therapist at G.F. Strong tried to get me to do some painting and sketching, but I tried to sign my name with pen in my mouth, and it wasn’t a very encouraging experience. I made a scrawl ... but it wasn’t like anything from before.”

Jonker had sketched as a kid, and studied and appreciated the masters of Impressionism and Expressionism through a collection of art books in the family home. He never considered making drawings and paintings himself, especially now. There was art therapy at G.F. Strong, and the encouragement of their dedicated art therapist, but Jonker would not bite.

Only the dare from a friend who offered to do it just like him, mouth-stick paintbrushes and no hands attached, got him into G.F. Strong’s Art Room and to his first drawing.

“I didn’t want to look like a total idiot, but doing art felt good.”

Jonker’s initial artistic expressions left a positive and genuine impression on those privy to his early works. Being technically good from the get-go, a spark of enthusiasm began to build in the budding artist that lit a light in him from the darkness of quadriplegia.

“It felt good compared to all of the rest of the things I tried out after my accident that felt bad. That’s the problem with this wheelchair life: you compare what you can do with what you did before, and everything looks terrible.”

Painting was something he could build off of, something that felt good where he would not just be criticizing himself, or comparing himself to his former pre-injury life. Art became the key to his new existence.

Jonker refocused his efforts and daily energy allotment, which by now consisted of four hours per day of focused creative time for work, book-cased by four hours to address personal care, three hours to nourish his quadriplegic body and brain, and the remaining hours to live and have a social life and prepare for rest.

He took an introductory acrylic painting class at Vancouver’s Kerrisdale Community Centre. He studied colors and what works and what doesn’t, and then took a course called “Painting with the Masters”. Jonker was taught the techniques of his art idols, Matisse, Van Gogh, Renoir, and Canadian Group of Seven Masters. Studying from the best of them, he soon was able to produce remarkably executed small-scale copies of their works using mouth-stick paintbrushes.

But Jonker desired to go larger scale, and produce original art on par with his influences and inspirations.

Being aware of the groundbreaking work done by quadriplegic Sam Sullivan’s Tetra Society (www.tetrasociety.org) from his days at G.F. Strong, Jonker soon had a request in for an adapted easel that would allow him to paint original compositions on large canvasses. His limitation was physical movement. He could not paint with his mouth on a work area larger than 12” by 12,” producing canvasses no larger than 18” by 24” with the help of an assistant who would reposition the piece for him and his limited reach. There was no commercially available solution; hydraulically moving his chair up and down was logistically, physically and financially impractical. The canvass had to move for him, by him, and not tax a care attendant’s patience with the artist’s creative labour and painstaking production time.

Tetra is a creative organization that takes an old-fashioned approach to getting things done for people in need of assistive devices that are not commercially or financially available to persons with disabilities. The national community-based society matches volunteer engineers, technicians and handy persons with requests for assistance from persons with disabilities. The volunteers take joy in designing, fabricating and modifying simple, cost effective machines



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Tetra helped me succeed in life after my injury. . .

and tools that radically improve the quality of life of those with physical limitations. Tetra heard Jonker's need, met and consulted with him, and soon a Tetra project was in the works.

For about \$200 in parts, and through the dedication and vision of Tetra volunteer engineer Gregg Harris, Jonker got his device. With a Black and Decker power drill as a motor, a bicycle chain plus sprockets, some plywood and cloth backing on roller drums with a toggle switch controller, Jonker had the world's first power easel and the capability to paint large scale. He could simply tap the switch lever to shuttle his canvass up or down as he painted on different sections of his four-foot by four-foot new works.

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"Tetra helped me succeed in life after my injury."

Further support from the Vancouver village in Jonker's rebirth came from Tetra's sister organization, The ConnecTra Society (www.connectra.org). Dedicated to connecting people with disabilities to the community at large on many levels, Connectra's mission is to reduce systemic barriers that prevent active participation and contribution of the skills and abilities of the disabled in the cultural and financial marketplace.

Jonker's small business plan was a perfect fit for ConnecTra's services. It was through networking at a ConnecTra event that Jonker was able to negotiate placement of his art at the Vancouver International Airport in an area dedicated to displaying the works of Canadian artists. Up there next to his art heroes, 'Jonkers' will be seen and his works will speak from the village that raised a man to the world. <



> Writer / photographer / composer Garry Angus brings 25 years of global live-wire experience to stories. Direct experience at Hong Kong's Whitehead refugee camp in 1990 determined his work for CIC's refugee resettlement programs and national disability organizations. His goal: "to enable people to see and reach their personal potential."

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